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ABSTRACT

A project investigated the cultural life, ideology, and education systems of particular prison gangs. It focused on recent changes in the gang system regarding gang education, organizational structure, and the balance of power in prisons and in relations with street gangs. Finally, the project assessed California's response to its prison gangs, in particular its attempts to intervene through prison education classes and counseling, and by confining gang members in the new, high-tech "maxi maxi" security housing units. The project sought information on these gangs, as interview subjects became available: La Nuestra Familia (NF), La Eme (Mexican Mafia), Black Guerrilla Family, Aryan Brotherhood, and newer offshoots. Interview findings indicated that NF delivered members a secretly administered education on a range of subjects: basic literacy skills training, etiquette and personal hygiene instruction, enunciation and rhetorical skills, weaponry, and guerrilla warfare. After years of training, the NF offered its most elite students leadership training and classes in how to set up NF regiments and illegal operations on the streets during parole and how to use the law for the organization's benefit. The NF education department was the gang's chief recruiting and socializing institution. It trains professional teachers who are under the command of each of the gang's regimental lieuteants and writes documents crucial to the gang's operations. NF persisted in its call for equity for Latino prisoners. The special control units where those prisoners identified as gang members were housed offered prisoners absolutely no education, counseling, or self-improvement programs. Here, in the breeding ground of California's prison gangs, gang members cannot take classes in the prison's official education department even if they want to, and the NF and other gang educational agendas go unopposed. (YLB)

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The Spencer Foundation--Final Report Eric Cummins

California Prison Gang Project

Focus of the research

The gang project was designed

1) "to investigate the cultural life, ideology and education systems of particular prison gangs"

2) especially "focusing on recent changes in the gang system regarding gang education, organizational structure and the balance of power on the yard, and regarding relations with street gangs"

3) and, finally, to assess "the state's response to its prison gangs," in particular its attempts to intervene through the prison's own education classes and counseling, and by confining gang members in the new, high-tech "maxi maxi" Security Housing Units.

The project sought information on any of the following gangs, as interview subjects became available: La Nuestra Familia, La Eme (The Mexican Mafia), The Black Guerrilla Family, the Aryan Brotherhood, and any of their newer offshoots--Norteños, Sureños, The Northern Structure, the Border Brothers, the Bloods, and the Crips.

Most specifically, the project sought to answer the following questions:

--What do prison gangs offer their membership?
--How do gang members see the gang system as functioning in prison?
--How do gangs instruct their members in the rules, strategies, and world view of the gang?
--Are the gangs still running organized, covert education programs?
--What is the current level of political militancy in the gangs?
--What is the level of secret political study and revolutionary rhetoric in the gangs?
--What is the guard staff's attitude toward gangs?
--How does guard staff use the gangs?
--How do guard gangs function in the balance of power on the yard?
--Do gang members attend prison education department classes?

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--How is the prison's education department addressing the problem of gangs?

Changes in Plans

Since interview contacts opened up first with La Nuestra Familia, the project finally concentrated on this gang exclusively and its offshoot The Northern Structure, and then in its last stages The Black Guerrilla Family as well. The NF and the BGF are allies, so these interviews could be done safely. Interviewing with these gangs, however, then made contacting La Eme and the Aryan Brotherhood impossible, since they are arch enemies of the NF and the BGF.

In the end, interviewing with staff from the California Department of Corrections proved much more difficult than getting into the gangs. After official approvals from the Office of Research and the Senior Special Agent of the CDC Investigations Unit, all requests to interview staff at specific institutions were flatly denied. At night by telephone, however, individual gang investigators proved willing, even eager to talk. Since interviewing education staff at prisons was denied, for data on the correction department's current official education system, I resorted to soliciting mail from inmates confined in the prisons, by advertising my project in Prison World magazine and the newspaper of the California Prisoner's Rights Union, The California Prisoner.

I eventually scuttled my original plans to hire field interviewer assistants with prison gang contacts and experience. First, gang informants proved more suspicious of the motives of my initial employee assistant than of myself. Second, that employee developed a drug problem and proved unreliable. As a consequence, I did all interviewing myself.

Finally, data collection from one of the trials that I had planned to watch has to be postponed to the future. This homicide case of NF members in San Jose has not come to trial as yet. Data from this trial will contribute immeasurably to our understanding of this gang's secret communication systems and should finally give us tools to measure the prison system's success in gang suppression inside the walls.

Findings

--What do prison gangs offer their membership?
--How do gang members see the gang system as functioning in prison?
--How do gangs instruct their members in the rules, strategies, and world view of the gang?
--Are the gangs still running organized, covert education programs?

All those interviewed said prison gangs function inside like police forces, each with its own constituency: the AB's protect the white prisoners, the BGF protects blacks, La Emé represents Sureño Latinos and the NF represents Norteño Latinos. The extreme level of violence inside California prisons, both prisoner and guard violence, makes the threat of death the central fact of prisoner life and models the prisoner's psyche. After release, the gangmember seems to take this new psyche home with him. Membership in a prison gang is for life. Members in all four major gangs take a blood oath--there is no way out of that commitment except in death. These four gangs are now active on the streets as well, where each continues to represent its constituency as a de facto police force. Members of La Nuestra Familia/Northern Structure generally seem to join for two basic reasons: Some of those interviewed claim that they initially joined the gang for protection on the yard. They were not gang members before prison, but they belonged culturally to that group of California Latinos who call themselves Norteños. In prison, that put them at risk of attack from La Emé, the warrior arm of Sureño Latino prisoners. Others interviewed said they had had long histories of gang involvement prior to imprisonment and saw prison gang membership as the realization of their life's aspirations, as the crowning achievement of their life. One informant compared becoming a mafioso to becoming a lawyer or doctor. La Nuestra Familia/Northern Structure thus offers its members physical protection, high status within the prison and afterwards in the underclass Latino community as well, a sense of cultural pride, and even economic security for themselves and their families. While a member prisoner is inside, the gang sees that his family is provided for. Outside, during and after parole, the gang's banks make capital raised through criminal activity available to members and their families for small business start-ups of legitimate businesses. Finally, inside and to some extent outside the prison as well, the NF

delivers its members a secretly-administered education ranging from basic literacy skills training to etiquette and personal hygiene instruction, to enunciation and rhetorical skills education, to weaponry and guerrilla warfare classes. At its most advanced level, after years of training, the NF offers its most elite students leadership training and classes in how to set up NF regiments and illegal operations on the streets during parole and how to use the law for the organization's benefit. The NF Education Department is the gang's chief recruiting and socializing institution. It is one important means by which the gang's worldview is sustained and propagated. It functions through an extensive secret bureaucracy within the prisons that appears to mimick the corrections department bureaucracy itself. It is as if the gang has studied and mastered the means by which corporate organizations maximize success by increasing efficiency. The NF Education Department trains professional teachers who are under the command of each of the gang's regimental lieutenants. At the gang's zenith in the late 1970's, huge volumes of paper, written essay exams and progess reports on each student, passed to the teachers, and on to the lieutenants, and sometimes higher, and then returned to the "soldado" corrected and graded. More recently, after serious court attacks almost destroyed the NF in the early 1980's, the NF and its newer offshoot The Northern Structure has reduced its paper trail considerably. Structure members continue to have their in-prison lessons, though less is written down now. Documents crucial to the gang's operations, however, like orders from command and the gang's constitution or "bonds" as they are called, continue to be written--in miniscule "mini-print"--and transported from yard to yard, tier to tier and prison to prison or to the streets in "keester stashes" (in balloons inserted in the rectum). By this means, among others, gang business goes on. Much of the original NF Education Department remains intact in Northern Structure education, though it has been forced to take on an even more subterranean form and a less formal organizational structure. This change is no measure of the gang's demise. After members of the gang were convicted under the Rico racketeering statute in the 1980's, leaders decided to reorganize for the group's better protection. Whereas previously the organization was divided into large departments reporting to each other in a clear command structure, now the gang is partitioned into many small, separate cells consisting of just a handful of soldados. Members in the cell receive orders rather anonymously from other cells. In this way, if one cell is busted and "snitches" it can't take down the entire command structure with it. As a result of moving to this new

organizational structure, NF/Structure education has taken on less institutional, less formal means. But it is still there.

--What is the current level of political militancy in the gangs?
--What is the level of secret political study and revolutionary rhetoric in the gangs?

La Nuestra Familia originated in 1968 as one of the in-prison warrior arms of La Raza, a policing faction, in other words, of the California Latino wing of the civil rights movement. It was one of the political products of the California prison's rehabilitation era cultural/ethnic pride movement. In its earliest phases, the NF to some extent saw itself as a Latino proletarian revolutionary prisoner movement. It agitated fiercely for equal treatment of Latino prisoners in the prisons . This much it continues to do. The NF/Structure persists in its call for equity inside, and in that limited sense it remains an organization with a political goal. In any broader sense, however, the gang has lost its politics entirely. It is now a corporate-style mafia organization with profit for its members as its main expressed goal. From one point of view, the group looks like a failed revolutionary impulse that was turned away from political struggle; what we see today might be the remains of a failed prisoner proletarian revolt that is now very little political. From another point of view, the NF/Structure may still be seen as politically militant. In a thoroughly traditional way, the gang may be one which has now simply come to adopt a capitalist, corporate model as the surest way to power in America. Surely, the NF's criminal entrepreneurship is politics in the same way that the Sicilian mafia's is--both organizations struggle to protect the economic interests of a particular class and ethnicity.

--What is the guard staff's attitude toward gangs?
--How does guard staff use the gangs?
--How do guard gangs function in the balance of power on the yard?

California prisons are the most violent in the nation. Much of the lethal violence comes from guards. The state is one of only three in the U.S. that allows its guards to wield guns inside the prisons, even in cell tiers, and to put those weapons to use. In other states guards break up inmate fights with nightsticks and tear gas. The threat of death from guards is far greater in California than in any other state

in the nation. From 1984 to 1994 correctional officers shot and killed thirty-six inmates in California state prisons, three times the combined total of such deaths in other major prison systems throughout the United States. What this has meant is that in California more than in other places prison gangs consciously move against guard units when they feel it is necessary. Guards are included in California's struggle for power on the yard. Interview data from guards was not available to me for this study. Interviews with gang members suggest three ways in which guards participate in gang activity: First, some guards openly sympathize with one gang faction or another and provide protection and favors. Second, some guards themselves participate in gang-like behavior--one gang informant tells of a retaliation shooting by guards of an AB member; another tells of a guard tying a "blue rag" to his nightstick to indicate his Emé gang affiliation; preliminary leaks from the Corcoran prison grand jury investigation quote a former guard telling of "a pattern of shooting inmates for sport" at that prison. Finally, and most commonly, guards make conscious use of prisoners' gang affiliation, often double-celling enemy gang members to initiate a fight or releasing enemy gang members to an exercise yard to set up a fight. Guards have been known in these circumstances to supply weapons to one or both prisoners before the fight. Much remains to be learned of guard gang behavior in the California prisons.

--Do gang members attend prison education department classes?
--How is the prison's education department addressing the problem of gangs?

One of the most surprising findings of this study has been the revelation that the special control units where those prisoners identified as gang members are housed offer prisoners absolutely no education, counseling, religious or any other type of self-improvement programs. This no doubt is intended as simple punishment. But its unintended effect is that in "the hole" or the Security Housing Unit the only available education today is that of the gangs, and here, as noted, they deliver a comprehensive curriculum. Here, in the breeding ground of California's prison gangs, gang members cannot take classes in the prison's official education department even if they want to, and the NF and other gang educational agendas go unopposed. This represents the most astonishing abdication of the rehabilitation era notion that official

prison education and counseling should intervene in the prisoner's life and attempt to subvert the value system of the criminal subculture in one of the places where it is propagated, the prison.

Significance of the Findings

These findings will form part of a larger work on California's recent prison boom, the expanded use of imprisonment to punish even minor offenders, the privatization of police power in the state, and the simultaneous spread of prison gangs to the state's streets. This book will help us understand the ways our criminal justice institutions in California are malfunctioning, thus fueling their own illegitimacy. A rising sense of the illegitimacy of Californian criminal justice exacerbates a process of accelerating balkanization of our population into warring, feudal armies. Taken in this context, this material on NF gang education in the prisons points to a crisis in California culture. As California moves to make it a criminal act for a legal immigrant to attempt to send his or her child to public school, it should cause some alarm to think that the educational bureaucracy of the NF is there in the wings, ready to take over that child's education.

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